

THIRD EDITION



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HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF  
**MAURITANIA**

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ANTHONY G. PAZZANITA

# Historical Dictionary of Mauritania

*Third Edition*

Anthony G. Pazzanita

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To my mother and father

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propresidential **political party** set up a few months before, the **Pacte National pour la Démocratie et la Développement (PNDD)**.

**ZNAGA (variant: Zénaga).** The term for vassals or tributaries, assigned to those mostly of Sanhadja **Berber** extraction who had been compelled, by virtue of their defeat at the hands of the **Beni Hassan** in the **Char Bobha** (1644–1674), to accept a low social status. Their inferior position in Mauritanian society was constantly driven home by their obligation to pay tribute (*horma*) and to perform various services.

**ZOUÉRATE.** A settlement that owes its existence to the nearby **iron ore** extraction operations conducted by the **Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM)** and its French-dominated predecessor, the **Société Anonyme des Mines de Fer de Mauritanie (MIFERMA)** since 1963. Zouérate is one of the most economically vital areas of Mauritania. Located near the older town of **F'Derik** in the administrative *région* of **Tiris Zemmour**, the town and its facilities came under heavy assault during the early phases of the **Western Sahara conflict**, at a time when the guerrillas of the **Polisario Front** were aggressively attacking the country's **armed forces**. One particularly embarrassing and destructive raid took place on 1 May 1977, when Polisario units fought their way into the center of the town after encountering no resistance from Mauritania's army. This attack made it virtually impossible for French or other expatriate workers to remain and thereby helped cripple a mainstay of the Mauritanian **economy**, exactly as Polisario intended. Following the country's exit from Western Sahara, life in Zouérate gradually returned to normal, and in later years the town benefited from the discovery of new iron ore reserves at el-Rhein and M'Haoudat, some 15 to 30 kilometers to the east. Served by Mauritania's only **railway** line, Zouérate was also linked to the larger city of **Atar** by an improved **road** and had a small **airport**. Its **population** was a modest 33,929 in 2000, according to an official government census.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the vantage point of nearly five decades since Mauritania's independence—and over a decade since the publication of the second edition of this dictionary—material on the country continues to be nearly as scarce as before, although somewhat more extensive studies can be found that deal with Mauritanian politics and society before the end of French colonial rule. This bibliography primarily lists books and articles in English and French, and in partial compensation for the shortage of publications on Mauritania in English, I have—as before—taken the liberty of including certain shorter articles (and even a few samples of press coverage) that might not merit insertion if other major resources were available. Bibliographies that deal with the country in exhaustive fashion are still confined to the 1992 volume by Simonetta Calderini and others (Volume 141 of Clio Press's World Bibliographical Series), as well as Mohamed Said Ould Hamody's *Bibliographie générale de la Mauritanie*, published in Paris in 1995, which is probably the best tool in any language for locating books, articles, archival materials, and even maps and other artifacts of an earlier era.

As far as full-length books in English on modern Mauritania are concerned, there have been at least two interesting additions since the mid-1990s. Mohameden Ould-Mey, a Mauritanian academic teaching in the United States, published an extensive political-economic study of his country in 1996 entitled *Global Restructuring and Peripheral States: The Carrot and the Stick in Mauritania*, and the late Samuel Cotton wrote a book on slavery in Mauritania, *Silent Terror: A Journey into Contemporary African Slavery* (1998). Alfred G. Gerteiny's *Mauritania* (1967) and the official U.S. government volume, *Mauritania: A Country Study* (1990), edited by Robert E. Handloff, continue to be of significant value despite the passage of time. In 2002, Professor Timothy Cleaveland published *Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation*, on the preindependence period (on which the works of Raymond Taylor and James L. A. Webb are also highly informative), and Urs Peter Ruf, a sociologist with years of experience on Mauritanian society, wrote another book on the slavery question, *Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender in Central Mauritania* (1999). Peter Hudson's 1990 book, *Travels in Mauritania*, although basically a personal story, provides key insights

into the country and its people in the latter part of the 1980s. Roughly a half-dozen French-language studies and first-person accounts have also appeared on the subject of the major human rights abuses committed by the Mauritanian government, mainly between 1987 and 1991. The periodic reports on Mauritania by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. State Department are also critical in this regard.

With the exception of major events such as the attempted coup d'état of June 2003 and Col. Ely Ould Mohamed Vall's successful overthrow of President Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya in August 2005, coverage of Mauritania in the print media in the United States and Great Britain remains very limited, obliging serious researchers to look elsewhere. The two best sources are the Economist Intelligence Unit's quarterly *Country Reports* as well as the *Africa Research Bulletin*, issued every month in both political and economic editions. The lengthy and detailed chapters in the *Africa Contemporary Record: Annual Survey and Documents* are also recommended, and *Africa South of the Sahara*, a yearly volume comprising part of the Europa World Yearbook series, contains political and especially economic data that are as up-to-date as one could reasonably hope for given the country's relative obscurity. Further in the economic realm, a March 2004 report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *An Investment Guide to Mauritania*, has an array of important information despite the document's overly optimistic tone. Another annual publication, the UN's *Human Development Report*, places Mauritania in statistical perspective alongside dozens of other developing (as well as industrialized) nations; it is accessible online at [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org). The London-based *Africa Confidential* newsletter and the weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique*, published in Paris, also deal with Mauritanian politics on a fairly regular basis. For those interested in following the ongoing publication of books and articles on Mauritania in several languages, excellent resources include the *Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, the *International African Bibliography*, and the *Index Islamicus*.

Since the 1990s, the academic world has witnessed the explosive growth of the Internet as a source of news, analysis, and communication, but as far as Mauritania is concerned, the results have been less than overwhelming. Although several sites such as [www.afrol.com](http://www.afrol.com), [www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com), and [www.arabicnews.com](http://www.arabicnews.com) contain articles on the country's social, political, and economic situation, little analytic rigor

is present (or perhaps could be expected), and the broader historical context of the material presented is often absent. It should be noted that the exiled Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanie (FLAM) maintains a website, [www.flamus.net](http://www.flamus.net), which is quite extensive, encompassing the group's announcements, some current news, historical information, and—importantly—the downloadable English text of the “Manifesto of the Oppressed Negro-Mauritanian,” a document that was not easily obtainable for many years. Moving to the Mauritanian government's own Internet sites, [www.mauritania.mr](http://www.mauritania.mr) can be consulted for official pronouncements and basic data (in Arabic and French only); the site of the Office Nationale de la Statistique ([www.ons.mr](http://www.ons.mr)) yields a trove of data in both the economic and demographic areas; and the website of the Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM), [www.snim.com](http://www.snim.com), gives the reader some idea of its wide-ranging activities in northern Mauritania, and periodically posts documents that enable the firm's strategic business planning to be comprehended. The overall scarcity of the information found on these sites compels the continued primary use of printed sources, and has meant that of the new data presented in this dictionary, perhaps no more than 10 percent has been derived from cyberspace.

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